

WikiLeaks and the Power of Secrecy

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The newest revelations from WikiLeaks is being described as a major scandal revealing potentially embarrassing and damaging secrets for the U.S., possibly causing tension between the U.S. and important allies and has caused the Obama administration to [consider legal action](#) against WikiLeaks. These leaks raise may cause lasting harm to the U.S. Much of this will be little more than embarrassing, but some [will have more serious implications for the country and its security](#).

The leaks raise a number of questions around the role and security of secret information in the current media and technological environment. The first and most obvious issue is that secure communications are rarely, if ever, 100% secure. Most communications can be hacked, intercepted or read in other ways. The internet and related technologies have revolutionized access to information but they have also radically changed how technology and secrecy works WikiLeaks is evidence that committed people with extremely strong technological skills can, relatively easily, gain access to all kinds of information. This is only the most recent and biggest scandal of its kind, but recent history is full of examples of allegedly secret information being discovered due to poor computer security. One of the major questions the WikiLeaks episode should raise is why so many people working for the diplomatic corps believed the information they were transmitting was truly secure. It is, of course, possible, that they knew that this information was not secure, but given the quotidian nature of many of their secret communiqués, did not care very much.

The WikiLeaks incident raises some bigger question about secrecy as well. While we bemoan WikiLeaks for revealing state secrets, it should be recognized that some of this information is not exactly earth shattering or needed to be kept secret in the first place. For example, the fact that some American diplomats think German Chancellor [Angela Merkel is “risk averse” and uncreative](#) and are [aware that the Afghan government is riddled with corruption](#), should not come as news to anybody who is even a casual consumer of news related to international affairs. Much of the secret information in these cables could have been gathered from spending twenty minutes online reading blogs about the countries or issues in question.

WikiLeaks, among other things, reveals the extent to which secrecy is used not to conceal controversial or dangerous information, but to conceal the banality of the information which is shared between diplomats and Washington. Cloaking ordinary observations in various degrees of secrecy and confidentiality give these observations the appearance of greater meaning helping to explain the value and necessity for much of the work the State Department does. Secrecy helps build walls between governments and everybody else. Diplomats, officials and members of congress can cite secret information to explain their decisions suggesting that they have access to

information that others do not. Revealing the unexceptional nature of much of these reports, and showing that these secrets are not always very significant undermines the credibility of these suggestions.

The notion that knowledge is power has been deeply ingrained in us in the information age. Implicit in this is the belief that secret knowledge is special power. While WikiLeaks almost certainly acted irresponsibly and has raised innumerable problems for the U.S. generally and the State Department specifically, it has also demonstrated that secret knowledge may at times be little more than an attempt to access or assert power, rather than reflect genuinely useful, sensitive or insightful information.